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When Movies Were Theater: Architecture, Exhibition, and the Evolution of American Film, by William Paul. Columbia University Press, 2016, 432 Pages.

Tober Corrigan

In the acknowledgements, William Paul indebts the discoveries of his newest book, *When Movies Were Theater: Architecture, Exhibition, and the Evolution of American Film*, to research of late 1920s wide-gauge filmmaking. Upon realising the exhibition format had originally been implemented to make up for lacklustre viewing experiences in ginormous movie palaces, he was inspired to write a revision of the early movie exhibition nostalgia found in Ben M. Hall's *The Best Remaining Seats: The Golden Age of the Movie Palace* and Ross Melnick and Andreas Fuchs's *Cinema Treasures: A New Look at Classic Movie Theatres*. *When Movies Were Theater* does inherit certain tropes from the illustrated history tradition though, such as the several full-page and half-page diagrams of old movie palaces more typically found in a glossy, coffee table book like Gregory Paul Williams's *The Story of Hollywood*. In content, however, a more favourable textual companion can be found in Barbara Wilinsky's *Sure Seaters: The Emergence of Art House Cinema*, where, like Wilinsky, Paul bores deep into a chosen subject—the history of "how the image is situated in architectural space" (for Wilinsky it was how cultural expectations of the image standardise film distribution and exhibition patterns)—so as to properly reappraise the popularised idea of early film history as a well-worn tale with a tidy, linear progression (5).

As a schematic framework, Paul accepts the traditional line that "the context, then, does in part determine the object" of filmic past, but then doubles down on this line of thinking in insisting that "context itself is often a historically determined convention" (3). The changing tastes of late-nineteenth-century live theatre become Paul's "historically determined" context of choice as well as his preferred history. The method here echoes Charles Musser's "history of screen practice", a pronouncement from 1990's *The Emergence of Cinema: The American Screen to 1907* which traced cinema's lineage back to the magic lantern show as an exercise of disproving the idea of a fixed cinema history (15). Kinship between Musser and Paul can be found in their desire to impose an "alternative to tabula rasa assumptions of a new 'medium'" implied by the way the Williams or Hill texts presuppose an ontological idealism among the grand movie palaces of old (Musser 16). Just as Musser validated his position by its being "frequently articulated between 1895 and 1908", Paul too finds his views enforced with real accounts from the turn of the twentieth-century (15). Yet for Paul, even Musser's magic lantern lineage carries with it too much abstraction, and so *When Movies Were Theater* clings to the "ongoing reciprocal relationship between movies and

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theaters, between text and context", as its through line evidence for a cinematic history fraught with architectural and ideological ruptures, coagulations, and other destabilisations (19).

Before getting to Paul's proposed history of cinema, the introduction firms up the relevance of his argument for film as theatre in an age where "the theater as a site for viewing a film is no longer inevitable" (3). Cultural anxiety around film exhibition in the digital space is assumed and then diagnosed with recency bias; Paul believes the fluid exchange between the "kinds of movies being made, audience demographics, fashion, and technology" to have been as prevalent in the 1900s as it is now and that his study will return scholarship to the "spaces which helped condition [the] understanding" now generally held, and taken for granted, about what, where and how a film experience should be (7, 22). However, like the conservative voices he is critiquing, Paul cannot help but end the introduction asking if we have "lost an understanding of the art form that seemed self-evident to past audiences" by abandoning theatrical exhibition houses altogether (2). The question is never answered directly again, only tangentially readdressed at book's end by way of nostalgic anecdote.

Chapter One, "Making Movies Fit", begins the book's quest to recontextualise early cinema first through comparing the medium to two other fads of the 1890s: panoramic paintings and *tableaux vivants*. These modes are remarked upon for blending theatre performance more explicitly with visual presentation. Cinema gained more traction than its competing forms over the next three decades because of the overwhelming praise over its realism, something Paul makes sure to note as the first significant historically determined context for early cinema. Offering examples from *New York Times* reviews and eye-witness accounts of film screenings in vaudeville houses and music halls, Paul analyses how appreciations for such concepts as setting, depth and realism were not inherent to the medium, or even to a timeless ideal, but were actually carried over from their growing valuation in the world of live theatre. As an example, Paul argues "the film image exposed the limitations of the horseshoe" style theatre not because the film image was understood as functioning ex nihilo, but because the limitations of the horseshoe were already being worked out by audiences seeing opera and plays there and growing dissatisfied with its form and function (52). Cinema emerges victorious in large part due to its designation as the "ultimate fourth-wall medium" at a time when naturalism in theatre was making the fourth wall an accepted category among theatre-goers (61). The first chapter then categorises the early 1900s as a period of intense growing pains, with the lack of specific theatres built for film resulting in the film image standing out to audiences for its depth, movement and dynamism by virtue of its incongruence with its environment.

In the second chapter, "Store Theaters", Paul covers the late 1900s, when audiences were becoming conscious enough of cinema to convince businessmen and architects to build proper movie houses. Actively working against the typical trajectory from nickelodeon to grand movie palace he finds in the illustrated histories (specifically citing David Bowers and Kathryn Fuller-Seeley's *One Thousand Nights at the Movies* in this regard), Paul dedicates the chapter to the store theatre, an edifice converted from small shops and boutiques in downtown business areas during a precipitous boom in ticket sales and general interest in movies. It is in the store theatres where Paul claims "the first sustained thinking about how the film image should be situated in architectural space" took place (94). As a result, many of the major movie theatre design conventions now taken for granted were being tested at that time. Everything from innovations in

screen display and projection lengths to floor slopes along the aisles and the eradication of middle aisle seats are considered the result of significant trial-and-error processes in the marketplace and amongst architects of the time. Staying true to the overarching theme of fluid histories, the store theatre's historical dynamism throughout the 1900s and early 1910s is also explored, particularly the way movie theatre architecture became more aware of itself and worked towards standardisation. The eventual eradication of the stage, the narrowing of the halls and closing in of the ceilings are all examples of the movie theatre moving away from live theatre halls in look while never being able to deny live theatre's influence on the transformation.

The latter half of the chapter hones in on the effects of store theatre architecture upon class consciousness, particularly in the seating arrangements "doing away with the spatial segregation" once a mainstay in the theatrical tradition (81). This section then continues to conflate ideology with architecture in its demonstration of the influence live theatre has over the store theatre. This approach is best understood, and most convincing, only after Paul breaks down how the democratic and minimalistic impulses behind the store theatre's layout were concurrently taken up by the Little Theatre Movement and its credo that "the play, or photoplay, really was the thing" (92). By the end of "Making Movies Fit", sufficient evidence is given for the free play between form and function in the early twentieth century, though Paul's hope for a clear causal relationship— to "use form as a means to arrive at function"—gets lost in the chaos of interchanging influences (23).

Chapter Three, "Palatial Architecture, Democratized Audience", and Chapter Four, "Elite Taste in a Mass Medium" together chart the progression in architectural standards from store theatre to movie palace. Like Robert C. Allen's *Vaudeville and Film, 1895–1915: A Study in Media Interaction* and Charles Musser and Carol Nelson's *High-Class Motion Pictures: Lyman H. How and the Forgotten Era of Traveling Exhibition, 1880–1920*, Paul is quick to acknowledge the progression a slower, more fitful one than popular accounts suggest. Cleaving to the lens of architecture where others did not, "Palatial Architecture, Democratized Audience" attributes the sudden uptick in seating capacity and auditorium size to the insatiable demand for moving pictures by the general public. Co-opting the vaudeville tradition from which it began, 1910s cinema, for Paul, worked toward an exhibitory idealism, where the seat capacity and openness of the floor plan promised the sort of major event previously expected from live performances. The central example is the 1914 Strand on Broadway—the first large theatre devoted exclusively to movies—which in form harkens back to composer Richard Wagner's functional hope for a "unified experience for the audience" in the mid-nineteenth-century theatre (101–2). Most discussion on the Strand's architecture concerns its symbolic power, with detailed paragraphs on the experience of the layout for the theatre-goers. The Strand is eventually cited as not only forever influencing movie theatre exhibition but influencing a film's bottom line, a move that ultimately transitions *When Movies Were Theater* away from a dominantly architectural history and into the "cross-fertilizing influences" of film's production and distribution stages promised in the book's introduction (19).

Starting with Chapter Four, "Elite Taste in a Mass Medium", the emphasis of the book switches to the *business* of show business where "legitimate theatre provided the model", with legitimate theatre being the standardised result of the Strand experiment of 1914 (131). As an example of Hollywood business practices cross-pollinating with live theatre exhibition, Paul suggests a direct correspondence between the travelling theatre troupes of the 1900s and the incorporation of first and second runs into the lexicon of movie release patterns in the late 1910s

and beyond. Paul lists several antecedents to travelling theatre too, so as to round out the research and critique the belief in early cinema, or any cinema, as "unencumbered text" (3). None of the borrowed quotations from twentieth-century movie critics or technical passages about architectural minutia ever feel unearned, though it is around this point when the sheer breadth of the researched topics, along with the shifting perspectives between aesthetics, sociology and commerce, start to dilute the earlier emphasis on architectural history.

By the chapter's end, Paul shifts his focus yet again to the new role of artistry as a distribution tool between the World Wars. He highlights notable films like *Citizen Kane* (1941), which were specifically marketed by the studios in their first runs for director Orson Welles's "distinctive style" (171). If it feels surprising that the American film industry in that period used tactics now considered commercial or hackneyed to promote its auteurist fare, that is certainly Paul's intention. Great pains are taken in this chapter to prove Classical Hollywood quite predictive of later trends in awards season marketing, all to help further frame film history as a perpetually unstable social object. With style distinctions come new class distinctions, an echo still heard today in a world of art-house and specialty movie theatre chains. Despite its relevancy to the modern world and its attempt to tie back into the tradition of variety theatre, Paul's exploration of the birth of the niche market overlaps with Wilinsky's *Sure Seaters* in a way that detracts from the originality of his own thesis.

Chapter Five, "Uncanny Theater", moves away from a literal history altogether, opting for the exploration of the psychological and phenomenological ramifications of live theatre viewing habits on early cinema. After very brief overviews of André Bazin and psychologist Hugo Münsterberg, the chapter attempts to reconcile what Paul calls the "twin inheritance" of movies in the silent era: the theatre and the magic lantern (187). Addressing an architecture of the mind comes late and sparingly in the book, but this is surely due to the realisation that Tom Gunning's "cinema of astonishment" has laid much of the groundwork already (188). Paul finds fascinating the tension that makes for "uncanny theatre"—the contradiction of an art form made of purely mechanical and material parts capable of providing an experience that "moves us beyond any conventional rational categories that may contain it" (193). This concept is given voice with the "picture setting"—a large set on stage surrounding the frame of the screen meant to directly evoke the time period and place of the motion picture—and the attempts at live re-enactments of filmed sequences during intermittent breaks in the programming. The complementary nature of theatre and film reaches its most "uncanny" when a particular instance of this blending is described: "Compared to filmic illusion, a staged horse race is lacking as reality because we must be complicit in the illusion … but the very physical presence of the actual horses … make the race exciting in a different way" (222). The argument eventually works towards a sort of apex of the overall project, where Paul blends spectator psychology and phenomenology to arrive at an affective argument for film's umbilical connection to the live theatre. Eventually, however, history cuts the cord. Paul closes out the chapter with a quick catalogue of all the major disrupters—the talkies, the television, the internet—whose unified effect changed the movie screen "from a theatrical to an architectural object" (229). This shift heralds the remaining chapters' return to consideration of form and aesthetics as the primary catalysts of movie theatre advancement.

Though only the conclusion is titled "Ontological Fade Out", the sixth chapter, "The Architectural Screen", and the conclusion essentially work together towards the same function. If

we consider the theatre-film relationship William Paul's metaphysic, then his work on post-silent cinema can be appropriately classified speculative. Piggybacking off of famed architect, engineer and thinker Ben Schlanger (whom Paul notes to be a personal influence upon him), the chapter follows the influence of Schlanger's thought on the movie theatre experience as it is understood today: sleek, naked, no stage, no curtain, just screen. Even when several pages of the chapter become devoted to a close reading of the differences in the 35mm and 70mm versions of Raoul Walsh's *The Big Trail* (1930), the book's method never loses sight of its objective; disproving that the movie screen, like the movie theatre and the history of film exhibition, "is eternally the same", or that it has ever had a Platonic ideal worth chasing after (231). Staying true to the rally cry of this book's introduction, every individual film, theatre or exhibition strategy explored in-depth is proven to be in free play with the context of its given moment.

When Movies Were Theater ends with an extended personal anecdote (the only one of its kind in the book) about Paul's revelatory experience during Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) at the Loew's Capitol Cinerama release. Even in a viewing context post-television and nearing the digital age, Paul uses an emotionally charged anecdote to argue for an experience he believed to be among the last vestiges of theatre in cinema. Whether this is good or bad he does not say, though this close reading of Kubrick encapsulates well the book's ambitions and its occasional failings. There is often great strain in the detours made towards arenas never initially advertised. Occasional oversimplifications of complex traditions in film studies appear (such as the aforementioned psychology and phenomenology), which, although addressed with good intentions and in keeping with the book's mantra, feel a slight to the experts cited. Paul's penchant for jumping back and forth through cinema history may be in keeping with the book's philosophy of multivalent histories, but it often sacrifices the clarity and vigour of the argument. What proves the most thorough and convincing aspect of the text is Paul's strict account-keeping of all the consistent inconsistencies which have marked cinema history from its earliest days to its latest. Given the sheer breadth of topics covered and the number of scholarly antecedents gathered, early film scholars of production, distribution and exhibition methods will find in *When Movies Were Theater* a great resource with which to begin their own research. Theorists and practitioners of movie-house architecture alike will welcome Paul's catalogue of examples and will consider it a most satisfying history. More casual readers should keep to the traditional illustrated histories Paul cites early on, though any reader invested in the concerns surrounding present and future film exhibition will find the book an essential re-examination of the subject.

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